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Fashioning Queer Bodies: Intersections of Dress, Identity, and Anxiety for Queer Women

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The purpose of this research is to understand the relationship of dress and queer women, and how their sexual identity influences their appearance management behaviors without ignoring other subject positions such as class, race, ethnicity, location, age, and religion. Understanding queer women's experiences with clothing is of benefit to society for promotion of equality. It is hoped this research will result in the reduction of discrimination.

Researchers have studied attitudes towards homosexuality (Levitt & Klassen, 1974), homosexual's experiences with everyday heterosexism (Swim, Pearson, & Johnston, 2007), and homosexual's experiences with overt acts of discrimination (Herek, 1989). In a survey of over 30,000 people in the US, over 80 percent of the sample stated they preferred not to associate with homosexuals (Levitt & Klassen, 1974). Herek (1989) found that several heterosexuals openly discussed their hate and discrimination towards the homosexual community. Swim, Pearson, and Johnson (2007) reported that experiences of verbal abuse and hostile environments were common for homosexual individuals, and in 2010, the FBI ranked hate crimes against homosexuals third on their list of hate-related crimes following race and religion. Questions related to stress, discrimination, and the fashion system for queer women were largely absent in the literature reviewed. Investigating the complex experiences of appearance management behaviors of queer women will shed light on possible anxieties and discriminations from the fashion industry.

Qualitative research methods were used to answer the following three research questions. (1) How is gender identity constructed and negotiated in different spaces and places for queer women through the use of appearance management behaviors? (2) Does sexual identity influence dress choices of queer women? (3) Do queer women feel anxiety, pressure, or discrimination from the fashion system and the appearance management behaviors in which they participate due to their sexual identity?

Participants were recruited by flyers and word of mouth. To be eligible for the study, the participants had to identify as female and queer, and be out to their friends, family, and employer about their sexual identity. Participants were 20 women who live in Colorado, Connecticut, Washington, Oregon, and New York. The ages ranged from 18 to 35. All women identified as Caucasian except two identified as mixed race. Nine participants were undergraduate students, seven were employed full-time, two were unemployed, and two were graduate students.

To answer the research questions, 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, and the participants filled out a daily diary for two weeks. Participants took daily pictures of their outfits and completed a follow-up interview at the end of each week. In the diary, the participants were asked to rate on a scale of one to five (five being very stressed and one being not stressed) how stressed they were getting dressed and wearing their outfits in different spaces. Interviews were coded line-by-line using open, axial, and selective coding.

Frequencies were calculated from the survey scales in order to report on everyday anxieties or stress of the participants.

Participants in the study described various connections with or rejections of the masculine and feminine binary. Connection to masculinity or femininity was absent for 14 of the women in the sample. Most women explained they felt in-between or androgynous. Four of the women rejected the terms masculinity and femininity and claimed the gender queer identity.

The women used parts of their appearance to navigate their masculine and feminine presentations. Portrayal of masculinity and femininity in 17 of the participants' appearance swayed back and forth depending upon the anticipated future spaces. All participants indicated that hints of masculinity in appearance signified their queer identity. Those who purposefully added masculinity to their daily performance had agendas for those additions such as creating a safe space for other queers who were not out, communicating queer identity to others, or rejecting feminine expectations at work. One participant did not add masculinity to her appearance out of fear of being perceived as queer.

All participants in the study indicated they changed their dress or wanted to change their dress after they came out. Once out, some of the women dressed more masculine, cut their hair short, included more blatant queer indicators in their appearance, or wanted to change their appearance in some way to be more visibly queer. All 20 women indicated at some point during data collection, they had at least one type of queer clothing or one aspect of their appearance that signified their queer identity. The participants' experiences with queerness in their dress changed depending upon the space and people they anticipated to be around. Eight women felt their appearance or clothing suggested they are queer all of the time, six women only purposefully dressed in queer clothing in anticipation of being in a queer space, five women were aware of the straight privileges they received from their appearance, and one participant actively tried to not dress queer or appear queer at any time.

All participants reported they felt anxiety or stress related to their queer identity and appearance at least one time during data collection. Some participants had only mild stress while others had severe stress that caused significant changes in behavior on a daily basis. Sources of stress or anxiety included appearing queer, dressing too queer, and appearing too heterosexual.

Understanding queer women's experiences with clothing is of benefit to society for promotion of equality. Results from the research indicate queer women have vastly different experiences with dress, yet clothing serves as a source of stress and discrimination for many. Queer women of color's experiences with clothing are also in need of research to promote activism and awareness of discrimination against the queer community in regards to dress.

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